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EDITORIAL NOTES

European countries, and especially France and Germany, can give American teachers valuable lessons on the effective teaching of languages. These

NOTES ON THE
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people have learned through much vital experience that the elaborate study of philological and grammatical principles, while of scientific value, may yet leave the pupil quite inefficient in the *use* of a language. The pursuit of rules, constructions, and technical minutiae may give linguistic knowledge of worth to the specialist, but the *mastery* of a language is not acquired in this manner. The Europeans have discovered that their welfare depends in considerable measure upon their being able to understand and employ the everyday speech and writing of their neighbors, and this determines their teaching very largely. Speaking generally, they keep constantly in mind the practical value of a living language, and the pupil is encouraged to use it almost from the start. He does not first memorize a body of grammatical rules, and then proceed to apply them in a mechanical manner; the rules are acquired for the most part after some familiarity has been gained with the language as a means of expression. Most of the teachers whose work I observed proceed on the principle that a young pupil must have at least a slight eye-, ear-, and vocal acquaintance with a language before he can advantageously study its grammar.

One may visit classes in the *lycée* in France or the *Gymnasium* in Germany where he will hear only the English language employed—and good English, too—during an entire recitation. He will find that the teachers use idiomatic English with ease and fluency, and the pupils read and converse in the language without marked difficulty or hesitancy. It seems a mere matter of course in these classes that all are to use as the medium of communication the language being studied, and not simply memorize and illustrate rules concerning it, as we so frequently do in America. Having in mind the work in our own country, I have been often much impressed with the facility of these people, teachers and pupils, in the handling of a foreign tongue. They do not go blundering along, striving to remember and apply formulae they have acquired as a consequence of diligent memorizing. On the contrary, their ears and tongues early become somewhat accustomed by actual experience to grasp and employ the language in an automatic way; and this alone can give *mastery* of any living language. He who interprets or speaks by rule, consciously and deliberately, will get on badly in most linguistic situations in which he may be placed.

These Europeans begin the study of modern languages earlier than we do, and this is of immense advantage in the achievement of their principal aim—the acquisition of a language for purposes of ready and effective intercourse. We start languages late, and we do not expect to use them practically, partly because we imagine that formal linguistic study is good for “mental discipline,” and partly because we have a notion that familiarity with the grammar of a foreign tongue is essential to any sort of comprehension of our own language. These aims lead us greatly to exalt technique, and to minimize fluent expression, and ready and effective interpretation through eye and ear. If we should introduce our pupils to French and German in the elementary school, say in the seventh grade, we should be forced to adopt more efficient methods of presentation. We should lead them to a sense of the use of the language as a means of communication; and we should make them acquainted with it more synthetically, so that they would realize what was to be done with it, before we proceeded to treat it anatomically.

It must prove more or less disastrous to the effective employment of a living language to devote the time at the outset principally to its grammatical study. This method inevitably handicaps the pupil, since he is made conscious of details of construction that ought not to be prominently in the attention at all. One taught in this way becomes rule-minded; he acquires the grammatical habit of attack, and this leads to confusion when he is required to speak or interpret rapidly. The grammatical method made unduly prominent at the outset forces the attention on to the elementary units in language; but, in actual use, one should be aware of only leading features. A good reader in the native tongue, or a foreign tongue either, is never explicitly aware of all the details of every word he reads; far from it. He seizes upon groups of words as units, and ignores a large body of minutiae. But in the case of a pupil with whom technique has been magnified in the beginning, these minutiae fill his vision and hearing, and prevent the ready grasping of the larger unities, which alone have meaning. However, if one has first gained this hold on a language, so that he strikes at what is significant rather than at isolated details, then he may study its technique without losing himself in these details. His early formed habits will save him from such a catastrophe, as is seen in the case of the child who has learned in the usual way to speak his native tongue, and who later on studies its grammar.

The point will bear repetition, that the Europeans have a strong practical motive for mastering modern languages, and this has compelled them to abandon in many places the formal, mechanical methods of teaching which still persist so generally with us. The French, Germans, English, and Italians are so closely associated in all their activities, social and commercial, that they keenly feel the need of being able to *use* one another's language. It is not a theoretical matter with them at all. They are not spending much

time over the question, so prominent with us: Can one understand his own tongue without studying the grammar of a foreign tongue? The French need to understand English, for instance, when they hear it; and they must be able to read it, and to speak it on occasion; and they go to work with these ends in view to master it in the most economical way; and the principle applies to other nations and languages. Modern languages are as practical and necessary in Europe as arithmetic or spelling is in our own country, and this makes it easier to teach them rationally. It is not quite clear to our people that the German language, say, is of value anyway; and, considering the results of our system of teaching it, there is certainly reason for doubt regarding its utility. But, of course, we must have some sort of philosophy to indorse our practice, and so we fall back on the abstruse doctrines of "mental-discipline," and the vicarious mastery of the native tongue.

In accordance with their general plan of learning a language by employing it as the natives do, the European people are adopting a scheme for the interchange of language teachers, which promises to be of immense advantage. The plan is this: France, as an example, takes a certain number of graduates of Oxford and Cambridge every year, and places them in the *lycées* to give instruction in English. England in turn takes a certain number of graduates of the Sorbonne and other French universities to give instruction in French in her secondary schools. These instructors remain in their respective positions for two or three years, perhaps, and at a small salary, since they are glad to gain experience in this way. It is thought that all modern languages in the schools of the important European countries will soon be taught by native teachers selected in this manner.

I have spoken of the teaching of modern languages only; but it is probable that the classics are on the whole more efficiently taught in Europe than they are in most places with us. At Eton, in England, one may see classes of boys not over twelve years of age listening with evident appreciation and enjoyment to stories read and told them in Latin by the Masters. Latin is used there as a real language, and not as a mass of dead material suitable only for mental discipline; though the grammar is thoroughly studied, of course. The Masters talk freely, easily, and naturally in Latin, and the pupils often respond in the same way. I think I came nearer at Eton feeling that Latin could actually be used in the interchange of ideas than I ever did before. How many of the pupils in the classics in our secondary schools ever acquire a sense of the naturalness and vitality of the ancient languages? If you are a Latin teacher, ask yourself whether the language is for your pupils something very remote from everything that they regard as human and desirable. Of course, we need some sort of philosophy again to appease our consciences and an economical public, and so we cry aloud that pupils ought for their soul's health to study subjects far removed from everything of

real, vital interest. Happily, though, we are growing away from this contention, at least in some parts of the country, where teachers have caught the new spirit of teaching language, whether ancient or modern. The teachers of the Old World are most skilful in elaborating high-sounding but empty reasons for their archaic way of doing many things in education; but one rarely hears anything of the kind in reference to the teaching of modern languages, concerning which the force of circumstances has compelled them to take a sensible view.

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